

Thailand's Education Gets An Upgrade To Meet Future Challenges

Written by Administrator

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As schools, businesses and offices in Thailand face closure during the coronavirus outbreak, new upgrades are taking place to meet the demands of 4.0 economy and a better educated workforce. The Land of Smiles seeks to resolve inequality between rural and urban areas, uneven quality among big and small schools, low global rankings and poor international test results.

Thailand is in a bind over its education program as it weighs between promoting its best and brightest students from a few schools or improving the students who are lagging behind. The southeast country of 69.4 million people is facing inequality in over 31,129 primary and middle schools. Small primary schools and secondary schools in the rural areas form the majority of schools in Thailand. The small schools, numbering 15,224, has less than 20 students in each grade of the rural areas. They lack adequate state funding and teachers to increase teaching and student performance. One teacher often has to teach multiple subjects.

Village and sub-district schools usually provide pre-school kindergarten and elementary classes. The schools of district towns have comprehensive schools from kindergarten to age 15 and separate secondary schools for students age 13-18. Rural schools have limited budgets and have fewer facilities than schools in the cities. Quality of teaching English language is lower and high school students have to commute 60 to 80 kilometers to schools in the nearest city.

Education is free through the Ministry of Education from pre-school to senior high school. The school year in Thailand is divided into two semesters, beginning from May to October and the second semester is from November to March.

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The Thai government administers the public schools. Charitable organizations by Catholic diocese and religious orders operate private schools for profit and fee-paying non-profit schools for over 300 large primary and secondary schools throughout the kingdom.

State schools provide students with a set of text books and exercise books from the National Education Development Plan each semester. The students can choose to buy or borrow the books. The teachers provide a copy of exercises in the classroom or homeworks for students. But text books may be different and more expensive at private and international schools.

For government schools outside of Bangkok, there are fees for books and classes at a rate of 10,000 baht annually for each student. Parents must pay a nominal fee for books and necessities, along with buying a school uniform.

Under Thailand's education system, there are 8 groups of Learning Essence for students on a yearly basis including Thai language, math, sciences, social studies and religion and culture, health and physical education, professional works and technology, foreign language and arts. Students do not need to study the subjects all at once. The students finish studying all of 8 Learning Essence groups and complete the standard knowledge and competence as the required curriculum at the end of the school year.

The Thai constitution guarantees free basic education of 15 years. Basic education in Thailand covers 6 years of primary school from age 6, Prathom 1 to Prathom 6. Classes are held 7 hours daily with a maximum learning time of 1000 hours annually. Ninety-nine percent complete primary education and 85% complete lower secondary school and 75% complete upper secondary school at the age of 16-18. For every 100 students in primary schools, 85.6 students continue to Mattayom 1, 79.6 students continue to Mattayom 3 and 54.8 continue to Mattayom 6 or occupational schools.

Secondary education starts at age 12 with 3 years of middle school Mattayom 1 to Mattayom 3 and 3 years of senior high school from Mattayom 4 to Mattayom 6.

Education at public schools is free until grade 9. The government introduced in 2004 and

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made free in 2009 3 years of free pre-school including 2 years of kindergarten (3- and 4-year olds) and 1 year of pre-school studies (5-year-olds). Upper secondary education is free for 3 years. Compulsory education ends with Mattayom 3 (grade 9) and students can continue to senior high school in preparation for university or vocational school programs.

Thailand comprises academic senior high schools, vocational high schools and comprehensive schools covering academic and vocational tracks. Students attending academic high schools aim for university studies while vocational schools groom students for employment or further studies. Students planning to attend senior high school must take an entrance exam. Upon completion of each level, they need to pass the National Educational Test (NET) to graduate. Students graduating from Mattayom 6 are candidates for 2 tests: O-Net (Ordinary National Educational Test) and A-NET (Advanced National Educational Test).

Homeschooling is legal since 2004, with families required to submit an application to homeschool and students are assessed each year.

Thailand faces the challenge of inequality in its education as it aims to prepare its 17.9 children for a digital economy, despite devoting a large budget to education. Thailand allocated USD 15.4 billion in 2015 or 19.35% of the government's USD 79.4 billion budget. However, the overall quality of Thailand's education ranks below the global average and focus on the best and brightest from a few schools.

Not only do primary and secondary schools face inequality, the country's 173 higher education institutions face the same situation. Only a handful of institutions are able to attract Thailand's top students and the state focuses on making the top universities more competitive.

However, international elite schools in Thailand are shielded from the problems affecting the country's schools. The elite schools continue to send the best and brightest wealthy students to expensive universities such as Oxford and Cambridge in the UK and Ivy League universities in the US. Upon their return to Thailand, they are able to secure top jobs through their overseas university alumni association and the network of other elite foreign university students.

In a report from IMD World Competitiveness Centre (WCC), Thailand slipped one notch to 43rd out of 63 economies in the World Talent Ranking 2019.

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Indonesia advanced 4 places to 41st, the Philippines went up 6 places to 49th. Malaysia stayed at 22nd and

Singapore came in to the top 10, from 13th

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to 10th.

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Switzerland places first in the report, followed by Denmark, Sweden and Austria. The top 10 countries have strong levels of investment in education and a high quality of life.

Various measures are being taken to address the problems affecting Thailand's educational system and meet the demands of a skilled workforce. Education Minister Nataphol Teepsuwan has outlined plans for a shakeup of the country's vocational education sector before the coronavirus outbreak. He is focusing on preparing the Thai workforce for advanced technology in robotics, artificial intelligence and automation. These were areas where young Thai graduates can confidently look forward to high salaries often well above salary levels attained by university-educated graduates.

Chairman of the Human Resource Centre of the project Mr Apichart Thongyou warned of the skills shortage to supply a projected need for 500,000 skilled local workers over the next five years. Chairman of the Human Resource Centre of the project Mr Apichart Thongyou stressed the need for more vocational teaching and training within a workplace environment as the path to the future for Thailand.

Mr. Nataphol has moved classes to be taught online and the government approved 2020 education budget to 50 billion Baht (USD 1.55 billion). He said that the Office of the Vocational Education Commission will now assess the needs of foreign business concerns considering investment in Thailand. A new education curriculum and training programs will be made to meet their needs and the highest international standards for Thais along with the required number of skilled local workers.

The new budget aims to increase the quality of 8000 primary and secondary schools in rural areas from 2020 to 2022. Most of the budget will be used to enhance students' foreign language skills as they lag behind their peers in the better and larger schools. A school in each village community unit will be selected and provided funding to improve its teaching quality. The minister said he plans to have all Thai teachers teaching the language able to speak English capably within two years with a 5-year target for students.

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The Thai education ministry has contacted various embassies to hire many native English and Mandarin teachers. There are 7,000 foreign teachers in Thai schools, but additional 10,000 teachers are needed.

The Thai education ministry will use the budget to improve students' digital skills, management of schools and related facilities and upgrading teachers' skills.

All schools in Thailand are scheduled to reopen, with the new semester to be moved from May 16 to July 1, in the face of coronavirus, according to an announcement by government spokeswoman Narumon Pinyosinwat.

She said the ministry will change learning methods to suit the curriculum at all levels for the 2020 school year.

Fast facts (sidebar) : Thailand

1. Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country that was never colonized by a European country.
2. One-tenth of Thailand's population of 69.77 million lives in the capital Bangkok
3. There are about 35,000 temples in Thailand. It is important to wear modest clothing, meaning no shorts or sleeveless shirts.
4. The national flower of Thailand is the orchid, with 1500 orchid species growing wild in the forest. It is one of the world's largest orchid exporters.
5. Six million visitors come to Thailand each year.

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